

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AMONG MULTI-ETHNIC STUDENTS AT SELECTED MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA: A SURVEY OF CAMPUS SOCIAL CLIMATE

Ramlee Mustapha
Norzaini Azman
Faridah Karim
Abdul Razak Ahmad
Maimun Aqsha Lubis

Abstract

Institutions of higher education are expected to be beacons for harmony, bridging racial differences and promoting an atmosphere of reason, inquiry and collegiality. Institutions of higher education are in a unique position to address the teaching and learning of diversity by creating an environment that will allow positive interaction among students from different ethnicities and backgrounds. Thus, the purpose of this article is to report the results of an empirical study on campus social climate as perceived by first- and final-year undergraduates. The Campus Social Environment Survey is employed to gauge various aspects of cross-racial interaction among undergraduates in both private and public institutions of higher learning. The initial analysis focuses on descriptive data on four main constructs of racial integration — accommodation, acculturation, assimilation and amalgamation. Implications and recommendations for teaching and learning as well as for future research are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Social integration, multi-ethnic students, Malaysian universities, campus social climate

Introduction

Ethnic relations can be defined as interactions among diverse ethnic groups (inter-ethnic) or within the same ethnic group (intra-ethnic). In this article, the focus is on inter-ethnic relations in higher education institutions. Polarisation or ethnic tension in a pluralistic society is becoming a political issue. Each ethnic group is protective of its own turf and privileges and therefore creates a “social border”. This “social border” could lead to ethnic tension and conflicts. Past events in the former Yugoslavia are a prime example of how over-protection of ethno-political supremacy could lead to the bloody ethnic cleansing of the “weaker” ethnic group.

In the context of multiracial Malaysia, the bloody ethnic conflict of 13 May 1969 has had long lasting effects. Immediately after the

event, the government took drastic measures to fortify unity among Malaysia’s ethnic groups. According to the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN), unity is the process of uniting the members of a society and the country as a whole through national ideologies, so that the members of the society can build an identity, common values and a sense of belonging (INTAN, 1994).

The measures taken include the introduction of new educational policies, such as recognising one national language and establishing a national school system. The government intends to use education as one of its tools for fostering unity among diverse ethnic groups, but almost four decades after the incident, ethnic relations among the main ethnic groups in Malaysia still remain polarised at almost all levels and sectors. This situation is admitted by scholars such as Zainal (1999: 16), who

states: "...varied strategies [employed to solve ethnic polarisation] have not yet succeeded in fostering the level of unity to which we aspire." There was even a claim that ethnic polarisation is becoming more serious in Malaysian society, especially among the new generation. Thus, this paper presents a critical analysis of ethnic relations among university students derived from an empirical study conducted at four universities.

Plural Society and Unity

According to Furnivall (1948), the term plural society refers to one in which the different ethnic groups live under a single political administration but, apart from economic transactions, do not interact with each other either socially or culturally. Although Barth (1969) criticises the concept of plural society as vague, preferring the term 'poly-ethnic', he defines a plural society as a society combining ethnic contrasts. Nevertheless, under pluralism, different ethnic groups can maintain their distinctive cultural identities. During British colonial rule, which lasted until 1957, Malaya at that time had reflected many of Furnivall's descriptions of a plural society, as the three main ethnic groups were located in different geographical areas and conducted different economic activities. They were governed under one political administration (Nazarudin et al. 2003).

The plural society in the Malay Peninsula is made up of many ethnic groups, each of which has its own unique culture and heritage, such as language, belief system, tradition and religion. The three main ethnic groups are the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. To date, the population of Malaysia is 27,116,218 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2008), with the Malays being the largest ethnic group (65%). By constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslims, and they, along with the natives of Sabah and Sarawak and aboriginal tribes in Peninsular Malaysia, are officially classified as Bumiputra (or sons of the soil) and are accorded a variety of constitutionally enshrined special rights or privileges (Ratnam, 1965; Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, 1976). The Chinese, who came to British Malaya in the early 20th century either voluntarily or through forced migration,

form the second largest ethnic group (26%), are mainly Buddhists, and have historically played an important role in trade and business (even in present times). The Indians, mainly Hindu Tamils, from southern India, brought in as workers by the British, make up the third largest ethnic group (8%). The other ethnic groups are classified as 'others'. The lifestyle patterns of the different groups have direct links to the differences in their values and expectations (Syed Serajul Islam, 2008). Moreover, the diversity of religions practiced in the country add more colours to the Malaysian identity: Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity and Animism. The official language in Malaysia is Malay, or Bahasa Melayu. However, English is widely spoken, taught as a subject and used in the teaching of science and mathematics in schools.

Despite being multi-ethnic and multi-religious, Malaysia is experiencing a gradual blurring of differences, especially in terms of costumes and dietary habits. Furthermore, Malaysia is generally regarded as one of the most successful non-western countries to have achieved a smooth transition to modern economic growth since independence in 1957 (Drabble, 2000). In 1990, the country met the criteria for Newly Industrialized Country status (NIC), and it is currently heading towards achieving full industrial nation status by 2020. This could only be achieved in a nation where there is peace and political stability, two important prerequisites for growth and development, among the ethnic groups of Malays/Bumiputras, Chinese and Indians. The ability of Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, in terms of language, religion and culture, to live together in a harmonious society is admittedly not easily obtained. However, Malaysians are more aware of the importance of national unity and for this reason know that it has "to be nurtured to be truly successful".

Since Malaysia achieved its independence 50 years ago, there has been much development in the country, not only quantitatively but qualitatively. The early economic transformation and diversification from agriculture to manufacturing in the 1960's-1980's, and then to technology-based development in the 1990's to the present, is a positive step towards realising

Malaysia's effort to achieve fully developed nation status by the year 2020. Qualitatively, the multi-ethnic population lives together and works together in realising the country's overall objectives of growth and prosperity. According to Musa Hitam (2007), nation-building is not just about providing highways, byways and hospitals. It is also about weaving together national values for the citizenry to live by and devising greater missions to galvanise their camaraderie and spirit.

On record, the history of Malaysia in terms of ethnic peace has been commendable when it is compared to other countries with mixed populations of ethnic groups, such as Rwanda, Bosnia, Thailand, Sudan, and India (Zaid, 2007). The one major horrifying incident in Malaysian history is of course that of 13 May 1969, which saw bloody clashes between the Malay and the Chinese, an incident that Malaysians do not wish to see repeated. Unfortunately, 32 years later, in 2001 Malaysians witnessed clashes between Malays and Indians, and recently, in November 2007, an organised demonstration was led by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in Malaysia.

According to Shamsul (2006), the basis for conflict between the ethnic groups stems from identity contestation in the form of language and culture. In the 1970's, for instance, the Malays were adamant that the proposed national culture should have the Malay culture as its core. Such attempts that appear assimilative or homogenising in nature were naturally viewed with alarm by the Chinese. For one, the concept of a national culture did not go over very well, as there was disagreement with making the Malay culture the core of national culture. Relationships between the ethnic groups are rather complex, intricate and sensitive, especially when dealing with matters of religion, culture and language, features important in identity contestation, a phenomenon created by the British in the context of colonial knowledge and its investigative modalities (Shamsul, 2006). According to Shamsul, it is through the colonial practice of codifying, documenting and representing the social, cultural, economic and political state in history that modern identities in

Malaysia like Malay/Malayness and Chinese/Chineseness have emerged, consolidated and fortified.

Education and Unity

In any society, educational systems are closely related to societal needs because of the symbiotic relationship that exists between them. Educational systems cannot ignore the political, economic and cultural-ideological spheres that make up their environments. Population changes, technological advances, and social movements are some of the environmental factors that influence the functions of education. As a result, educational systems have environments that give them purpose and meaning and define their functions, limitations and conflicts. In Malaysia, since independence, one of the national objectives has been unity; henceforth, all the enacted educational policies have stated that unity is their overarching objective. The Razak Report of 1956 became the foundation for subsequent national policies on education such as the Rahman Talib Report (Federation of Malaya, 1958; 1960). Many of its recommendations were included into the National Language Policy, which made Bahasa Melayu, as a unifying factor, the national language and medium of instruction in the national schools. The centralised school curriculum and examination, and the inclusion of subjects like civic studies, are attempts to ensure integration, tolerance, and national consciousness. At the university level, two common courses, namely, Nationhood and Ethnic Relations, are taken by all students.

Higher education in Malaysia is facing a future in which the student body will reflect the increasing diversity of the population in general. With such a diversified social structure in institutions of higher education, there is a need for Malaysian institutions of higher education to play an important role in promoting national unity by providing opportunities for interaction among different races and ethnic groups, establishing a Malaysian culture and a set of shared values. As such, opportunities for students to interact with racially and ethnically diverse peers will become more frequent. It is hoped that these interactions will produce greater educational gains and civic values.

Issues of Ethnicity in Malaysia

Since independence in 1957, it is fair to say that the state of the plural society in Malaysia is a far cry from Furnivall's plural society, in spite of inheriting social, economic and political vestiges of the colonial's policy of "divide and rule" in the country, in which many ethnic groups already existed at that time (Ruslan, 2003). There have been many instances when relations between ethnic groups were fraught with tension and distrust. Thus, the process to bring about national integration is indeed a big challenge. The term "integration" has been defined as a process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre (Haas in Syed Serajul Islam, 2008). In brief, national integration is a process of bringing together discrete elements of a society into a more integrated whole, or to make out of many small and diverse societies a closer approximation of one nation (Wriggins in Syed Serajul Islam, 2008).

The issue of race or ethnicity has been the most persistent social dilemma in Malaysian society. Some writers in national newspapers argue that Malaysian universities have done poorly in their attempts to foster ethnic integration (Kamaruzaman, 2006; Sidek, 2007). Many observers point fingers at institutions of higher education for failing to unite diverse students. These critics contend that instead of uniting student bodies, current campuses are in danger of breeding intolerance, ethnocentrism and segregated communities on campus (Segawa, 2007). These matters require urgent attention. This is because many believe that higher education is the key to bridging racial differences, given its atmosphere of academic freedom and collegiality. Because universities often provide the opportunity for students to interact with others from varied ethnic, economic and social backgrounds, effective new strategies to address the racial divide become critical.

Past Research

Findings of a study on the inter-ethnic relations of students in institutions of higher education

indicate that the disposition towards ethnicity has been internalised in the self as the product of cultural capital gained from individual history and social processes in social settings, including that of education. Such disposition may be due to socialisation processes at home and in school (Amir, 2004; Faridah & Amir, 2004). Rabushka's (1971) early study on ethnic attitudes among university students in a public university shows that the university was a highly polarised place. A research report on "Practices toward Unity in Six Schools" by the Planning and Research Unit of the Ministry of Education (1995) shows that these schools have yet to achieve their objectives of shared values and practices toward unity. According to Mat Saat (2004), a multi-ethnic society that harbours prejudice and suspicion carries a high risk of racial tension.

However, a number of studies have shown that campus communities that are more racially diverse tend to create rich educational experiences that help students to learn and prepare them better for participation in a democratic society (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1999; Gurin et al, 2002). For example, students from diverse ethnic groups often have differing opinions and viewpoints about a wide range of pressing contemporary issues such as religion, war, terrorism, the death penalty, free speech and the prevalence of discrimination (Ancis et al, 2000; Chang, 2003). Because of the power of diversity to shape life experiences, it can create a rich and complex social learning environment that can subsequently be applied as an educational tool to facilitate students' development.

Types of Diversity

An emerging body of literature has begun examining the benefits of an ethnically diverse university campus for students' educational gains. Research conducted by Gurin et al. (2002) identified three ways of exposing students to diversity in institutions of higher education: structural diversity, informal interactional diversity, and classroom diversity. They define structural diversity as the numerical representation of ethnic students' groups on campus, which is conceptualised as an essential but insufficient ingredient for meaningful inter-

group interaction. They postulate that informal interaction diversity reflects the frequency and quality of interracial contact, which typically occurs outside of the classroom. Classroom diversity, on the other hand, is contained within the structure of a course and includes content, knowledge about diverse groups of people and interracial interaction with classroom peers. Gurin et al (2002) further proposed students' actual engagement with diverse ethnic peers as the theoretical basis for examining the effects of racial/ethnic diversity on university students' experiences. This is based on the belief that informal inter-group contact and classroom diversity will likely confer the greatest benefit of racial/ethnic diversity on students' educational gains and civic development. The results of the research further supported the conclusion that an ethnically diverse campus significantly enhances students' intellectual development in several ways: openness and understanding of diversity, higher levels of academic development, increased intellectual engagement, and enhanced critical thinking and intellectual self-concept. These findings not only suggest that exposure and interaction with diverse peers are educationally significant, but they also support a well-established premise regarding students' development, that is, that interpersonal interaction with peers is one of the most powerful educational resources in higher education (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

One critical function of the higher education learning environment is to introduce students to complex and diverse perspectives and relationships (Gurin, et al, 2002). It is argued that racial/ethnic diversity can profoundly affect students' development and educational outcomes. Langer's (1978) concept of a conscious mode of thought has been widely used as the theoretical ground where active thinking will develop new ideas and ways of processing information. Evidently, when conscious modes of thought are encouraged through complex social structures, individuals interact with unfamiliar people, encounter people who hold different expectations and beliefs, and therefore begin to think and behave in new ways. As a result, the disequilibrium created through uncomfortable, new, or

uncertain social environments may generate students' intellectual engagement and cognitive growth. Thus, the benefits of conscious modes of thought and complex social structures are enhanced when racial/ethnic diversity exists and universities create opportunities for diverse students to interact and learn from each other in and out of the classroom.

Allport (1954) has offered the most widely recognised theory about the benefits and dynamics of cross-racial interaction. Through a series of studies, he shows that multiracial interaction can lead to positive outcomes, but those most benefited from this interaction depended on the presence of appropriate conditions. Without these conditions, contact may even heighten rather than reduce racial prejudice. According to Allport's intergroup contact theory, cross-racial interaction is more likely to lead to positive race relations and unity when it occurs under equal group status within the situation, pursuit of common goals, intergroup cooperation, and with the support of authorities, law or custom. In other words, the contact theory makes clear that if positive results from cross-racial interaction are desired, the environmental conditions that improve the quality of contact are just as important as having interpersonal contact. In the context of development and changing values, how do students of various ethnic groups view unity and their relationship with others of different ethnic backgrounds? Based on the preliminary findings of a research study, this paper examines, from the university student's perspective, the interaction and social behaviour of students in higher education and its implications on organisational policies towards integration and unity in Malaysia.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the level of interracial/ethnic interaction among undergraduate students. To examine campus experience within a diverse educational setting, it is critical to consider the students' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration process, interactions both inside and outside the classroom, and the climate or activities across different groups on campus.

Methodology

The target sample for the study was first-year and final-year undergraduates at four universities in Klang Valley and Selangor. The Campus Social Environment Survey was administered during the last month of the second semester of the 2007/2008 session. The students randomly selected to complete the questionnaire were from the departments of social sciences and sciences. Of the 1,043 respondents, 19.1 percent were male and 80.9 percent were female. In terms of race, 70.9 percent were Malays, 13.5 percent were Chinese, 3.5 percent were Indian and the other ethnic groups amounted to 12.2 percent. The profile of respondents is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information of the respondents

Characteristic	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Race		
Malay	740	70.9
Chinese	141	13.5
Indian	37	3.5
Others	125	12.1
Total	1043	100.0
Gender		
Male	199	19.1
Female	844	80.9
Year of Study		
First Year	935	89.6
Final Year	108	10.4
Religion		
Islam	806	77.3
Buddhism	142	13.6
Hinduism	30	2.9
Christianity	58	5.6
Others	7	0.6

Instrumentation

Researchers in this study developed the Campus Social Environment Survey, a questionnaire given to university students under the auspices of research on The Development of a Social Behavioural Index for Higher Education Institution Students towards Unity in Malaysia sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education. The Index was designed to measure the degree of social integration among students of different races on a university campus. In other words, the main aim of the index is to gauge racial diversity on campus, specifically social interracial interaction. The survey consisted of 34 Likert items to identify the students' perceptions and attitudes regarding interracial integration among undergraduates. A 4-point Likert scale was used from 4 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). To interpret the means, this range was used:

3.26 – 4.00	Strongly Agree
2.51 – 3.25	Agree
1.76 – 2.50	Disagree
1.00 – 1.75	Strongly Disagree

In order to quantify "unity", four dimensions of the construct were selected: Accommodation, Acculturation, Assimilation and Amalgamation. The four dimensions are defined as follows:

- Accommodation:** A process by which individuals and groups, though aware of each other's values and norms, make the necessary adjustments to social situations to prevent or reduce conflict in order to carry on together in their varied life activities; this is seen as the first stage towards integration.
- Acculturation:** An adaptive process by which a group acquires, retains and/or relinquishes distinctive characteristics of its culture or traits to conform to those of the dominant group.
- Assimilation:** A process of boundary reduction that sees groups incorporating elements of the dominant group's culture and traits while still maintaining their own distinctive ethnic and cultural identities. There is a blending of behaviours and values through social interaction leading to greater homogeneity in society.
- Amalgamation:** This construct is regarded as the highest level of integration and is viewed as an indicator that social distance between groups is weakening and ethnicity is becoming less salient.

In the final section of the survey, the respondents were requested to fill in demographic information such as gender, race, and year of study. Table 2 contains the descriptions of the four dimensions along with their overall mean scores and standard deviations. The survey was pilot-tested for its validity and reliability. A small number of respondents (n=30) were involved in the pilot test. The study was revised based on their comments. The reliability of the survey was computed using an internal consistency formula which reveals a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.65$, indicating that the survey is a relatively stable measure of undergraduate students' perceptions of social interracial interaction.

Table 2: Dimensions, Overall Means and Standard Deviations of Social Integration

No	Dimensions	Overall Means	Standard Deviations
1	Accommodation (9 items)	2.76	0.30
2	Acculturation (9 items)	2.64	0.29
3	Assimilation (11 items)	2.89	0.27
4	Amalgamation (5 items)	2.90	0.40

Results

Data from this study were analysed by examining each item from the four dimensions of racial unity, which are Accommodation, Acculturation, Assimilation and Amalgamation. Using these clusters of responses, the pattern of undergraduates' interracial social integration for the current student sample (n=1,043) was scrutinised. The means and standard deviations for students' social integration by race are reported in Tables 3-6. Overall, the three main races, i.e., Malay, Chinese and Indian students, are performing moderately on the four dimensions of social integration.

Table 3 shows the level of accommodation among the respondents. Overall, there is positive agreement on the items that measure the accommodation dimension (mean score, M=2.76). Of interest is item 2: "I respect the beliefs and cultural differences of other ethnic groups" (M= 3.39), which indicates very high agreement regarding respect amongst students from different ethnic groups, and which augurs well in the context of unity. However, item 3, "I am willing to have a room-mate from another ethnic group" (M=2.39) shows that reluctance and boundaries still persist, perhaps related to

Table 3: Accommodation by Ethnicity

No Item	Item	Malay (N=856)	Chinese (N=141)	Indian (N=37)	Total
1	Feelings of unity exist in campus	2.78	2.81	2.81	2.79
2	I respect the beliefs and cultural differences of other ethnic groups	3.39	3.39	3.46	3.39
5	Willing to have a room-mate from another ethnic group	2.39	2.35	2.49	2.39
7	I take a long time to make friends from other ethnic groups	2.40	2.23	2.51	2.38
12	My sense of belonging towards my own ethnic group is stronger since coming to campus	2.57	2.38	2.49	2.54
20	I make an effort to learn something new from other ethnic groups	2.98	2.73	3.14	2.95
26	My perceptions towards other ethnic groups are good	2.87	2.77	3.00	2.86
27	I'm accepted in the company of other ethnic groups	2.53	2.48	2.24	2.52
30	I feel campus activities foster a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect amongst multi-ethnic students	2.98	2.99	3.24	2.99
Total		2.76	2.68	2.81	2.76

religious and cultural differences, especially for the Malays and Chinese. The three groups, however, disagreed that they take a long time to make friends from other ethnic groups (M=2.38), which indeed is encouraging.

In the educational setting of the university campus, students learn to adapt their behaviours and habits when interacting with students from different cultural and religious backgrounds. This may account for the positive but moderate levels of interaction and awareness amongst the students (m=2.64). Table 4 illustrates the level of acculturation among the respondents. Dietary acculturation seems to exist; nonetheless, Malay students seem to have reservations toward going to restaurants of other ethnic groups (m=2.37). Perhaps it is the issue of consuming food permitted by their religion (Halal) in un-Malay restaurants that creates discomfort and may explain the low level of agreement and social interaction for the Malays (m=2.37), compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts (m=2.64 and m=2.62, respectively). Of special interest is item 32, 'I agree with the meritocracy system', and the students unanimously disagreed with the statement that entrance into university is by merit only (m=2.19).

Table 4: Acculturation by Ethnicity

No Item	Item	Malay (N=856)	Chinese (N=141)	Indian (N=37)	Total
4	I seek help only from my own ethnic group	2.26	2.26	2.08	2.25
15	I'm comfortable socialising with friends from other ethnic groups	2.78	2.64	3.22	2.78
16	I enjoy eating the food of other ethnic groups	2.75	2.86	3.08	2.77
17	I'm comfortable eating in restaurants of other ethnic groups	2.37	2.64	2.62	2.42
18	I eat together with friends from other ethnic groups	2.83	2.87	2.81	2.83
19	I'm comfortable wearing the costumes of other ethnic groups	2.73	2.84	2.49	2.74
21	I visit the homes of friends from other ethnic groups	2.81	2.77	2.76	2.81
24	My social awareness towards other ethnic groups is high	2.94	2.98	3.08	2.95
32	I agree with the meritocracy system	2.18	2.23	2.14	2.19
Total		2.62	2.67	2.69	2.64

Table 5 depicts the items that were used to measure the assimilation dimension. The total average score reflects a medium degree of social assimilation (m=2.89). Furthermore, the Malay (m=2.47) students indicated that they do not believe that their lecturers practise ethnic discrimination. However, the Chinese (m=2.70) and Indian students (m=2.59) slightly agreed

that their lecturers practised discrimination. Other than that, all three groups do not feel threatened: in fact, they feel comfortable doing activities--social, cultural and academic--with one another. The campus environment, which provides ample opportunities for the students to observe, understand, and learn from one another the nature and similarities of the varied cultures and practices, seems to have some impact.

Table 5: Assimilation by Ethnicity

No Item	Item	Malay (N=856)	Chinese (N=141)	Indian (N=37)	Total
3	Involved in social and cultural activities of other ethnic groups	3.03	3.06	2.95	3.04
6	Campus activities give opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction	2.88	2.77	2.97	2.87
8	I'm happy to do activities with friends from other ethnic groups on campus	3.16	3.09	3.24	3.15
9	I'm comfortable discussing academic matters with friends from other ethnic groups	3.11	3.06	3.08	3.10
10	I'm comfortable having a roommate from another ethnic group	2.51	2.69	2.76	2.54
11	I feel proud when friends from another ethnic group are successful	2.66	2.70	3.03	2.68
14	I'm more open towards other ethnic groups since coming to university	3.00	2.95	2.84	2.98
22	I believe lecturers from other ethnic groups	2.96	2.87	3.16	2.95
23	Lecturers in my university practise ethnic discrimination	2.47	2.70	2.59	2.51
29	I don't feel threatened when other ethnic groups practise their culture and religion on campus	2.83	2.79	2.78	2.83
33	I support my friends from other ethnic groups during competitions on campus	3.10	3.06	3.30	3.10
Total		2.88	2.88	2.97	2.89

1. The items in the amalgamation dimension are viewed as the highest stage towards integration (see Table 6). The overall mean of this dimension is 2.90, indicating the breakdown of certain boundaries between the ethnic groups. This is attested by the items on inter-marriage, as in item 31 (M=2.91) and item 34 (M=3.08). This could be taken to indicate the weakening of social distance and differences from ethnicity. Item 28, 'I'm proud to be a Malaysian' (M=3.36), shows one of the highest means, which indicates the pride of the students to be Malaysian regardless of colour, race and creed. Nonetheless, there is strong reservation toward acceptance of a non-Malay Prime Minister (M=2.12), indicating political contestation.

Table 6: Amalgamation by Ethnicity

No Item	Item	Malay (N=856)	Chinese (N=141)	Indian (N=37)	Total
13	Campus environment and integration activities have strengthened feelings of being Malaysian	3.05	3.09	3.05	3.05
25	I accept a non-Malay Prime Minister	2.11	2.18	2.14	2.12
28	I'm proud to be a Malaysian	3.36	3.35	3.46	3.36
31	I feel that inter-ethnic marriages foster integration	2.92	2.80	3.14	2.91
34	I have no problems if someone from my ethnic group marries someone from another ethnic group	3.11	2.91	3.08	3.08
Total		2.90	2.86	2.97	2.90

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study may indicate that students in general possess moderate levels of social integration, as can be seen in all four sub-domains. Despite instances of negative feelings toward some acculturation and assimilation activities, the students also report greater gains in cultural knowledge and understanding, and in the ability to get along with people of different races and ethnic backgrounds on campus. This seems to support Allport's theory, which asserts that multiracial interaction can lead to positive outcomes but that those who benefited most from this interaction depended on the presence of appropriate conditions. Without positive interracial policies, racial tension may flourish. According to Allport's intergroup contact theory, cross-racial interaction is more likely to lead to positive race relations. Unity may occur under equal group status in pursuit of common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities, law or custom. In other words, the contact theory makes clear that if positive results from cross-racial interaction are desired, the environmental conditions that enhance the quality of interaction are just as important as having interpersonal contact.

While it is not the focus of this study, popular conceptions of students' self-segregating by race may be affected by religious demands, hence the reluctance to share a room and eat in a restaurant belonging to other races. We may therefore conclude that interracial integration between race/ethnic groups may be most beneficial when students interact more casually in organised campus activities.

Although many people think that polarisation is a problem, the university students have different opinions. They believe that polarisation has become a way of life or a “neo-culture” of the multiethnic society in Malaysia. They did not see polarisation as “racialism”. This means that “unity” can still exist in a society that is highly polarised. The students’ ethnic interaction shows several patterns. Polarisation in higher education is said to occur when ethno-groupings thrive, but these groups, due to their academic background, are more prone to tolerance and understanding of the other ethnic groups.

Overall, the high degree of acceptance and interaction of multi-ethnic students in the university is very encouraging. The educational setting of a university campus seems to provide an environment conducive to establishing and fostering feelings of unity. There is awareness and openness toward other ethnic groups. Issues pertaining to dietary and costume acculturation seem easier to deal with and help in the blurring of identity contestation and of what is “Malay/Malayness” and “Chinese/Chineseness” (Shamsul, 2006). As for issues relating to religion, these may require more effort and understanding from those involved in nation-building, especially universities, which can provide various educational and cultural experiences for diverse student communities to learn and prepare for mature participation in a diverse society. The opportunity to socialise and work together seems agreeable, and even inter-ethnic marriage seems acceptable. Perhaps the idea of the creation of Bangsa Malaysia or the Malaysian Race as noted by the former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir in his Vision 2020 may become a reality.

Recommendations

The findings from this study indicate that a university does not have to be highly structurally diverse to foster meaningful diversity experiences. However, universities need to

create environments that take advantage of the diversity on campus to enhance students’ social interactions through diversity-related activities. Innovative approaches that facilitate cross-group interactions such as intergroup dialogues can bring together diverse groups of students with the purpose of discussing issues related to their diversity, so that they can understand and appreciate each other better. Programs and services in student affairs must be inclusive of diverse perspectives and must structure opportunities for students to come together and share a dialogue about racial/ethnic differences as well as commonalities that the groups share. So far, research on the impact of these experiences is promising, suggesting that these dialogues are effective ways for students to learn to become citizens in an increasingly diverse society (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

As the nature of university activities continues to change, it might be useful to look at new ways to integrate racial/ethnic groups, both socially and academically, that do not require their involvement in traditional campus clubs and organisations. We need to look for ways that the students can make connections between their classroom learning and their campus lives that would further foster integration. This could be done with team projects, with problem-based learning activities, with novel ways to increase their interaction with faculty, with research projects that enhance student to student interactions and thus foster informal relationships, or in integrated themes that address those factors identified in this research.

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Correspondence Author : Ramlee Mustapha
ramlee@ukm.my